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Editors' Introduction: Imaginary Futures

by Robert F. Carley, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, SAJ, Alyson K. Spurgas and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT This issue introduction reflects on the upcoming 2025 Cultural Studies Association Annual Conference theme, "Imaginary Futures," and cultural studies futures. This issue contains several articles that address the "presencing" of possible futures, whether through Black popular culture; digital laborers, tech workers and online sex workers; cannabis commodity aesthetics and working-class Black and Latinx life in contemporary California; or racialization of the K-pop band BTS. This issue also features several articles in the special section, "Political Economy and the Arts," edited by Katerina Paramana, contributions to "Aporias," edited by Joshua Falek, and the *Positions* podcast, and six book reviews.

KEYWORDS cultural studies, disciplinarity, futurity

Cultural studies is always temporally bound. And in many ways, our attempts to decipher the present or the past are attempts to discern the future, to plan, to react, to anticipate, and to organize. A serious study of culture (however broadly or narrowly construed) as it is or as it was also compels us to think and study with what might be otherwise. The theme for the 2025 Cultural Studies Association's annual conference < https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org/conference.html> at the California Institute of the Arts is "Imaginary Futures." In so many ways, the theme can be interpreted to span a thirty-year period when the global neoliberal settlement—in place for more than a decade—was confronted with the "alter-globalization" uprisings, which were notable, too, for their global scope (e.g. Chiapas, Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre, etc.). The struggles that constitute this movement were galvanized by many slogans but, perhaps most popularly,

“another world is possible.” The slogan still rings true, but—in the absence of a sustained popular movement and in the wake of more recent “occupations” and Black Freedom Struggles—more distant or, perhaps, as a question today. Cultural studies is confronted with difficult, complex, and necessary sets of questions unified by its style of inquiry into the mercurial present. Both the annual conference and *Lateral* have been extraordinarily fortunate to host rich, transdisciplinary, cogent, and urgent scholarship for decades and will work to continue to do so.

In the call for papers for this year’s meeting, the final suggested sub-theme under the heading of “Imaginary Futures” is “The future of/in cultural studies.” This particularly reflective sub-theme raises several questions. One of the more important questions might have to do with the association of the history of cultural studies (and cultural studies at present) with social and political movements. What *is* the association between cultural studies and political and social movements across its history? Is cultural studies a product or the result of an abeyance of the British New Left; does it mark the defeat of the labor movement? Today, how do the many fields that exist between disciplines that are allied with, or are a part of, the cultural studies project share in the political and intellectual projects that form cultural studies’ conversational spaces, or how and in what way is cultural studies connected together as a project, field, or way of doing work? How has the ongoing restructuring of university colleges and departments affected cultural studies? Cultural studies is an intellectual, political, and pedagogical project, but how, and to what degree, does the awareness and self-positioning of individual scholarship embed itself in and articulate with the “project formation” of cultural studies?[1] Is there a connective thread between Stuart Hall’s work and cultural studies today? Or is that severed? And if it is, should we care?

What remains clear is that the practice of cultural studies is renewed each time *Lateral* and other journals publish scholarly articles; when formal and informal

groups mobilize scholars, cultural workers, and others for annual meetings; and when enthusiastic allies, friends, and fellow travelers organize symposia, colloquia, podcasts, book clubs, and gatherings of any and all sorts. Cultural studies lives on in experimental, subterranean, and fugitive spaces, too—these remain some of the most interesting and intensive sites for cultural studies projects. The broad distribution, and autonomy, of groups that we might identify as participants in cultural studies projects is both a strength and weakness.

What, if anything galvanizes these groups? It does, after all, take time and resources to produce scholarship and to attend meetings. And it takes an enormous amount of time and resources to organize events, to coordinate and curate publications and media, and to contribute to these. These efforts to organize, contribute, participate—to come together—are "the stuff" of the tenuous yet enduring unity of cultural studies. These efforts maintain and extend the conversational aspects of cultural studies. And this work, renewed time and again, is its history. Its principal place is neither in the institutions where one might find cultural studies struggling to maintain a foothold as a program, minor, or in department curricula. It cannot be, but often is, reduced to pieces (or even remnants) peppered into survey courses that acknowledge or hastily summarize its history or its "impact." It remains a fact that it is often a struggle to keep cultural studies fixed within the various institutional maps where it initially emerged (often enthusiastically) in the 1980s and the 1990s. If there is a unifying feature or an articulating principle for cultural studies it might be more closely associated with the idea that another world is possible. However, this slogan does not have the galvanizing force that it did for the alter-globalization movement. After all, "shocking" a group of people into action implies an external force. Galvanizing forces direct articulating principles, of already unified groups, to shift that principle towards strategies and into action.

Furthermore, in this moment of escalating fascist creep, the impending fall of US empire, and the catastrophic destruction of the earth and climate, these

questions become even more urgent. And in the midst of all of this, as Trump assembles a cabinet of billionaires to put the nail in the coffin, we come back to the issues raised by the "alter-globalization" uprisings, and we consider whether another world is, in fact, possible. Grappling with "imaginary futures" has never been more timely, and the concrete project of cultural studies has never felt more in need of galvanizing into action. We must connect our articulating principles to social movements—including movements that will fight for reproductive and gender-affirming healthcare, for educators' rights and academic freedom, for labor and environmental protections. Recently, we have seen cultural studies workers, leftists and, more broadly, indebted multitudes become galvanized by the assassination of a health insurance company's CEO—can we turn that energy into something more organized than the ensuing media spectacle would suggest? Can we link it to the project of cultural studies and imagine something more strategic, more principled, more concrete?

To respond at least in part to the question above about the association of cultural studies with social movements, cultural studies was never a movement. As Roderick Ferguson has argued, cultural studies, like the other "interdisciplines," placed itself (perhaps less fully or willingly when it did) in an institutional context, transferring the energies of the movements from the mid and late 1960s into institutions of higher education, and—by doing so—accepted a position of retreat and regress in new instituted relays of hegemonic power.[2] However, cultural studies' persistent suspicion of disciplines is baked into it in ways that, perhaps, it isn't with other interdisciplines. But, to what end? Although a portion of cultural studies embraces the idea, if not the practices, associated with the undercommons this, in itself, has not been a galvanizing force.

All this is to ask us to wonder about what cultural studies is today and where it is going. We're hoping that you think about this too and, perhaps, you have something to say about it. If so, we hope to see you around at our meeting in 2025. There is still time to submit < https://easychair.org/conferences/?

conf=csa2025> work to the conference. If cultural studies remains an unstable terrain, at least it has vistas from which it is possible to imagine and glimpse a range of possible futures.

This issue contains several articles that address the "presencing" of possible futures. RaShelle R. Peck approaches speculative Blackness and Black futurity through embodied, working-class performativity that challenges and disrupts the human/posthuman binary. Several examples of what she specifies as quotidian aspects of everyday Black lives both exceed a quotidian politics and "leverage critiques of the present." Both Sarah Earnshaw and Curtis Marez focus on social and cultural practices that begin to populate the contradictory spaces engendered by new enterprises and the ways that these materialize labor, and fractionalize and recompose classes. Both also think through the inventive abilities of workers to socialize workspaces differently. Julia H. Lee's analysis of the K-Pop group BTS is focused on performative labor, racialized discourse, and the reproduction of Orientalist fantasies issuing from out of the US's imperial relationship to Korea. This issue also features several articles in the special section, "Political Economy and the Arts," edited by Katerina Paramana, and a contribution to "Aporias," edited by Joshua Falek.

RaShelle R. Peck's "Everyday Black Futurity in Popular Culture" < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-2/everyday-black-futurity-popular-culture-peck/> excavates from multiple sites of Black popular culture a speculative Black futurity through various mediums of expression: visuality, speech, and performativity. Peck examines the use of everyday embodiment and performance as an expansive site of Black creativity and world-making. Her work adds to Black humanism and posthumanism as well as thinking about Black science fiction by showing how quotidian aspects of everyday Black lives, particularly those that refuse the politics of respectability, are generative of modes and models of Afrofuturism. Performances of "ghetto, ratchet, and hood"—such as by performer Cedric the Entertainer, rapper Missy Elliott, and rapper and model Megan Thee

Stallion—specify radical ways to center speculative futurity on defiance, sexual desire, joy, freedom, and pleasure. These aspects of everyday, life-as-lived Blackness mingle human and posthuman to resist racial capitalism's vexed portrayals of Black futurity.

In "The Incubator and the Interregnum: Theorizing the (Work)Places of Class Struggle," < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-2/incubator-interregnum-theorizing-workplaces-class-struggle-earnshaw> Sarah Earnshaw focuses on two groups of digital laborers, tech workers and online sex workers. Earnshaw conceptualizes the cultural practices and spatial organization associated with "platformization," a term that captures the current conjunctural figuration of post-fordist labor, in order to interrogate incubation. Incubation becomes less of a quotidian market-based concept associated with "positive disruption" and more of a way to think about class antagonisms. In a context where the interregnum can be specified through how it recomposes or decomposes classes, incubation can signify the moment where the technical composition of labor begins to make overtures through care, mutual protection, and other solidarities towards a new political composition. Earnshaw pursues a line of questioning that addresses how fractions of classes and occupational groups within them can "co-create places of protection and care to strengthen the struggle over an uncertain future."

In "Cannaboom: Race and Labor in California Cannabis Cultures," < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-2/cannaboom-race-labor-california-cannabis-cultures-marez/> Curtis Marez theorizes a "cannabis commodity aesthetics" that indexes (in a full sensory and semiotic sense) the lived field of Black and Latinx working class pleasures in contemporary California. At the same time, Marez shows how commodity aesthetics contain traces of the material limits associated with the struggles of waged workers. In short, cannabis commodity aesthetics contain contradictions of working-class Black and Latinx life in contemporary California. Marez summarizes these contradictions by explaining, in the article, that "Black and Latinx cannabis cultures combine images of freedom and

transcendence with depictions of the low wage jobs that many Black and Latinx people work. This is because, rather than an impediment to work, cannabis consumption is a kind of support for or accessory to labor. Many consumers use it to dull the tedium and pain of labor and to sustain them throughout the workday." Marez's approach to cannabis culture is situated in a rich contextual rendering of cannabis legislation in California and the emergence of the cannabis industry for medical and then recreational use. His contemporary analysis of cannabis enterprises is developed through interviews, ethnographic work, visual analyses of cannabis packaging, and social media analysis. Marez finds an active attempt to address contradictions of working-class Black and Latinx life within the industry itself through the collectivist orientation of cannabis unions. Here, workers partly socialize their labor in support of one another. Through practices that demonstrate intimate class solidarities, we see members of the Black and Latinx working class engaging in a prefiguration of better worlds despite facing-down the class contradictions that shape the present.

Julia H. Lee's "BTS and the Labor of Techno-Orientalism" < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-2/bts-labor-techno-orientalism-lee/> focuses on the globally popular K-pop band BTS to explore how Asian racialization centers the Asian figure as the embodiment of "the synthetic/mechanistic and the underdeveloped/primordial." Rather than posit these two configurations as oppositional, Lee argues that the seeming contradiction between what we may call technological advancement and organic authenticity is, in fact, non-existent; rather, the contradiction is that these two threads complement each other. Immersing her analysis in the development of the double-sided discourse surrounding the K-pop group BTS and their fans (ARMY), she reads these threads as complementary, illuminating the machinations between "techno-Orientalism, the abstraction and demonization of Asian labor, and Korea in the US imperial imaginary."

In this issue we feature a set of articles that address "Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being." These articles constitute a larger project, "Political Economy and the Arts," < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/> a special section of *Lateral* edited by Katerina Paramana. The goal of "Political Economy and the Arts" is to place performance studies in dialogue with contemporary critical political economy to produce an interdisciplinary configuration that co-contributes to imagining a world beyond the present.

"Enlightenment by Any Other Name" < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/enlightenment-by-any-other-name-teed/> by Patrick Michael Teed adds to Aporias < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/aporias/> , a special section that provides snapshots of the field of cultural studies, with an eye towards the lapses, overlaps, and contentions amongst competing theoretical texts. This section features shorter articles by emerging scholars making interventions into contested aspects of cultural studies in order to amplify, rearrange, or delve deeper into aporetic aspects of the field. Teed interrogates critical theory's "uncritical incorporation" of science, ranging from exposing such a fetishization as it impacts institutional funding, to pressing on the racially hierarchical and eugenical logics that are part of science's ontological core.

And, lastly, this issue features the latest installment of Positions < https://csalateral.org/archive/podcasts/positions/> , our podcast series that aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. In Episode 4, "Infrastructures of Transiency: On Cruise Ships," < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/infrastructures-of-transiency-cruise-ships/> Cultural Studies Association's Environment, Space & Place Working Group Co-Chair Richard Simpson discusses the local, global, and transnational impact of cruise ships and the cruise ship industry with Constance Dijkstra, International

Maritime Organization (IMO) policy manager for the advocacy group T & E, Karla Hart, co-founder of the Global Cruise Activist Network, and Luc Renaud, Associate Professor at the Department of Urban and Tourism Studies at the University of Quebec in Montreal. This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Francesca Savoldi.

Notes

1. Some recent arguments about the ways that scholars index a relationship to a broader cultural studies conversation in their teaching, scholarship, and political practice can be found in Lawrence Grossberg, "What Did You Learn in School Today? Cultural Studies as Pedagogy," in *Cultural Studies in the Classroom and Beyond: Critical Pedagogies and Classroom Strategies*, ed. Jaafar Aksikas, Sean Johnson Andrews, and Donald Hedrick (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Gilbert B. Rodman, "The Impossibility of Teaching Cultural Studies," in *Cultural Studies in the Classroom and Beyond: Critical Pedagogies and Classroom Strategies*, ed. Jaafar Aksikas, Sean Johnson Andrews, and Donald Hedrick (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Robert F. Carley, *Cultural Studies Methodology and Political Strategy: Metaconjuncture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); and Robert F. Carley, "Doing Cultural Studies: An Observation on its Politics, Methodologies, and Histories," *Democratic Communiqué* 31, no. 1 (2022). ↩
2. Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012). ↩

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Article details

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